Western Folklife Center
America Works Project

Interview Log

Walter "Bimbo" Cheney
interviewed by Charlie Seemann & Meg Glaser
at Elko, Nevada, September 7, 2011

Log prepared by Steve Green
Digital Audio File: AW110907-Cheney.wav

Note: Charlie Seemann is Executive Director of the Western Folklife Center; Meg Glaser is Artistic Director at the Western Folklife Center; Steve Green is Archivist at the Western Folklife Center.

Note: Time stamps are approximate, as generated by the logging software (Transcriva).

00:08. Introductory slate.

00:34. Bimbo Cheney cites previous jobs.
Jack of all trades. Was cowpuncher for two outfits in Nevada, the JD [ranch] south of Carlin, also "Sheep Crik" [Sheep Creek Ranch] south of Carlin. Has worked in feedlots, sale barns, has rodeo'd a little, has seen lots of different aspects of cowboying. Has "run a truck coast to coast," worked in the woods (hauling lumber)—chipping mills. Has even pumped gas. "Have done a lot of things."

01:10. What work he his doing now.
Is a miner—a heavy equipment operator for Newmont Gold. "I feed the mill." Mill 6 is a roaster type mill. He feeds the ore into the process system of the mill.

01:31. How he went from being a cowboy to being a miner.
Two ranches sold out from under him. It encouraged him to look for something else. Anyone who works on ranch can usually run machinery too, so he had a little machinery experience. Mines were willing to hire based on that. He started out as a truck driver, a "haul pack" driver. In 26 years [sic] he's advanced to production.

02:08. What is a "haul pack?"
A haul pack is a truck for hauling ore-- "ore haulage equipment." It's a huge machine with six tires that hauls muck from the pit to the leach pad, the waste pad or the mill. At the mill, they refine the gold.

02:40. How long he has worked for Newmont.
23 years [sic] the 8th of November.

02:49. How his job has changed from when he started.
Because of the time he's been there, they give him a little more lenience. A lot of the time they stay out of the way and just let him do his job, as long as it's safe (it has to meet their standards). His job entails working with the mill people, the leach people, the crusher people-- a lot of different individuals are in his work area so he has to be a little extra cautious. He thinks maybe they figure that because of his years of experience people might feel safer working around him.

03:44. How equipment has changed since he started.
It's become bigger and more automatic, mainly because of the way mining has grown in the last few years. It's expanded, therefore they have to have more people and their training program doesn't have to be quite as long if the equipment is easier to learn to operate safely. It's gotten bigger in size, also comforts added. When he first started there wasn't an air conditioner in every truck, nor was there an XM radio. Now there is, in every vehicle. You were lucky to have a working heater in the wintertime. Nowadays, a machine can be shut down [by regulations] for not having a heater or cooler. So the work has become more comfortable. Also, some machines have extreme power-- when he first started, he drove a 75-ton Wabco [brand of truck]. It had the power if you wanted to stay in first gear all day, but if you had to move a lot of loads, it didn't. Some of these trucks now run about 35 miles an hour out on a dirt road.

05:25. Feeding the mill.
The loader he runs is actually one of the smaller ones. He runs a 992 CAT loader generally, and it's kind of mid-sized or smaller of the fleets nowadays.

05:50. Comforts available in truck cabs and loading equipment.
XM Radio, AM, air conditioner, everything-- “just like working in town.”

06:13. His first day at Newmont.
Amazement. He had never been around machines that size even though they were small then compared to now. The average person when first starting is a little intimidated by the size of the machines. When you walk up to the tire and can only touch the center of the wheel, it's amazing. His first thought, like anyone on a new job, was "can I do this?" Maybe intimidation was the wrong word, but at least a certain amount of respect for something that size, before you just jump behind the wheel and take off. Same thing with the loaders. He has run the 994 machines but he's no production operator by a long shot. "Some of these guys can load a truck faster than I can load one bucket." It amazes him how much power they have now to dig these holes.

07:50. Pranks and hazing of new employees.
He hasn’t encountered any real hard pranksters. There were some around, but he knew a few people that had been in the cowboy business before their mining experience. They kind of coached him-- watch out for this guy, don't pay any attention to what that guy says, etc. If you have had a lot of different jobs or worked in different parts of the country, you can learn to read people a little bit. You know who to watch out for, and

who's going to come across straight. The mine has a no-horseplay rule because of the dangers that are there. They don't want you playing tricks on each other. He doesn't think he's played any tricks on anyone out on the job. Humor, jokes are okay in the time shack or lineout room. He can honestly say he doesn't play around when he goes to work.

09:51. On the job training.
He started on trucks. "That's the bottom of the pole." That's where any new hire usually starts out-- unless you've had some kind of prior training as a mechanic or electrician or something. You start wherever they need you and his just happened to be on the bottom. He started in haul trucks. Eventually he was allowed to use a machine for a small job and then they realized (that he could operate it)-- he either had the aptitude or they could teach him enough to get the job done. At one time he ran all the equipment on the mine except the shovels-- he still has yet to be in a hydraulic or electric shovel.

10:45. Describes the workplace.
He works on what they call the mill floor-- a huge dirt floor with the various ores that they are going to mill. You don't run high grade gold all the time. They'll have a blend of materials that he feeds into three hoppers— a hopper is just a big bucket type contraption that you dump the rock into, then that falls on to conveyor belts which carry it into the mill. He doesn't know a lot about the mill process even though he worked for Diegel[?] for awhile and was a mill operator when he left there, but it was a considerably smaller operation. Site where he works now is an open pit mine. He thinks it's about a half mile across at the top, maybe more. He thinks it's about 1,000-1,500 feet deep.

12:15. His relationship to underground mining.
When the mill was down for some reason, they put him in the pit. If someone is sick or on vacation, they might put him in their position. He works in the open pit part of the mine, but there are underground operations too and some of those [shafts] go directly from his pit to the ore. Others have their own drops or whatever they call 'em-- elevators that take [workers] underground. He has never been underground-- has never even taken the tour. He says "I'll get underground quick enough!" [meaning cemetery]. It's a different kind of miner-- a lot of the underground people are third or fourth or fifth generation miners. That's all they or their families have ever done. You see a lot of new faces in the open pit, people who have been curious about mining but have no ancestry or background in mining. That's a place where they can train [new people] and see what they're doing, from various observation points. They can keep an eye on the new guy.

13:50. Age of mining employees; health concerns; life expectancy.
From age 20-- well, younger than that-- he thinks they have trainees now that are in their late teens. Very young up to retirement age. He mentions Earl Longo [friend of the Western Folklife Center]-- he was 70-something when he passed away [ca. 2010]. He was a miner. That was his last job, what he did until he couldn't work. He thinks a luxury surface workers have is that their life expectancy is a little greater than the underground workers. They take every precaution-- he has only experience with Newmont, but any time he has said he needed a dust mask or ventilation or whatever, they get it to you. In

summertime, dust is a major problem. If he calls and says hey [I need something]-- he might be [put] on the list-- they're not going to get to him right now, but they are aware that he needs it. It's to their benefit too, insurance-wise. They don't want workers to leave there with a lung full of glass.

15:20. Where employees are from; adapting to gold mining from other mining.
They come from everywhere [all over the world]. He knows two Indian boys from New Mexico-- they are the same age as him and were rodeoing in Arizona when he first started. Miners are kind of "tramps" like cowboys-- they go where the work is and where they like to work. They will move to go to a job that they're familiar with. He's worked with guys from Virginia-- in fact, one reason he's not been underground is [Newmont] hired two miners from Virginia and one from Kentucky on the same day-- this was ten years ago or so-- they went into the mine on their initiation tour and said "this ain't for me." They were so familiar with the way things were done where they were from...

16:55. Describes typical day at work.
He doesn't even get to have a cup of coffee when he gets to work. They have what they call a "hot change." He will get off the bus [the company busses workers to the mine site], go into the time shack and get his "p.p.e." (personal protective equipment). He looks at the board to see where he's working and what machine he's got. [He works] generally at the mill [there are actually two mills side by side]. Jump in a pickup or a van with the other operator. They relieve the two [operators] that are working right now because the mill orders are on 24-7 [twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week]. They never stop. The only time you stop is to get fuel or if your machine breaks down. Call the mill, find out if he's on the same page with the operator he just relieved, then continuously, monotonously back and forth from the various stock piles to the feeders. There's times when this continues for a shift that is 12 hours long. You stop to fuel. The rest of the time-- depending on whether the material is dry, it can be a pretty easy day because the material goes right through, but not if it's muddy and sticky. Below the hardpan [surface dirt] there's everything from granite to clay, so he has to work with a variety of materials. He keeps a good steady flow of muck going to the mill-- 12 hours.

18:44. Length and variation of work shifts.
He works a 12 hour shift. His position is called a "vigilant." That means you take a break only if you get a chance. If the mill is running, it's easier for him, meaning, if they have a good run going, and he can set a pace that matches theirs, the day goes by-- it seems like 6 hours, like a short shift. But those days when you're fighting the material and the elements-- ice, snow, mud-- it can be a long 12 hours. He works a rotating shift. Right now he is on a seven-day-- what they call "long change." It ends on Friday night, he goes back to work for four "graveyards," then he's off for three days. Then he works three day shifts. Then he's off one day. Then he works three "graveyards," then he's off three days. Then he works four day shifts, then he's off for seven more [days]. His schedule doesn't let him go "down the road" and tell cowboy poetry very much.

20:06. Transportation to the workplace.
You can drive out [to the site] but parking is too limited for everyone literally to drive out. A lot of people will car pool. They give workers a badge so they can let themselves in the gate. Those who live closer, like in the Carlin area, a lot of them will drive out. They will actually get home before Bimbo's bus is even out of the yard. [The bus ride from Elko] takes about 25 minutes-- they have to stop in Carlin. Even if everybody that's going to ride gets right on the bus, they still have to wait until a certain time to make sure there's no stragglers. You don't want to leave one guy and then have to go back and get him. He's home about nine hours out of every 24.You gotta eat, shower, sleep, shower, dress, eat, go to work-- all that in nine hours.

21:32. Nicknames.
In order to get accepted-- he found this true in the cowboy trade too-- "when you earn a nickname you've made the crew." You may still have to earn each step, but you're part of the crew. He didn't get "Bimbo" from mining or from cowboying-- he got it as a small child, but it's a nickname, and so as soon as people accepted him, they'd usually call him "Walt," or "Walter James," or something-- UNTIL you're accepted, and then they say "Bimbo" or "Shorty" or "Slim." He would say 50% of the people on his crew have a nickname. There's a "Shoes" on the crew... He doesn't know where the nickname came from. He's from one other generation of miners from Utah. He came here [to Newmont] four or five years ago. He jumped right out there. Very capable operator. Started out on trucks but rapidly got on equipment and now he's a shovel operator, which is the top of the pay scale. That's about the highest pay other than foreman that you could get in the pit.

23:16. Superstitions and habits.
They talk about when your lamp goes out (even though he's not an underground miner)-- they claim if somebody's light goes out or whatever, their wife is not being faithful. There are guys who will only work from the left to the right-- or from the right to the left. He doesn't know if those are superstitions-- he thinks it's just the way they learned to do something. If you tell them “you've got to do it this way,” you have to show them because they can't just do it on their own.

24:19. What he likes about his job.
Where he is right now is not the more desirable of the jobs. He is pretty well left to do his job, not a lot of pressure. If a pit foreman wants something done, they call him on the radio. He has about four radios in [the cab of his loader] so there's one of them chattering all the time. They give him the option of getting in the most or the best... "Lots of times it isn't the MOST tonnage that you’re on, but the higher grade." They want an even, steady flow of material because when that material leaves the belt into the roaster (where the gold is extracted) it has to move through at an even pace. If some of your material is like sand, and then you have a two-foot boulder in there, that boulder will slow the whole process down. What they appreciate about what he does and what makes it so easy for him is to leave him alone. If he messes up, tell him. You can do that politely. Once, he had an "indifference" with the mill foreman, also two or three of the pit foremen at

different times, but all they want is for you to do the job too. They're supposed to know what it takes to get every person on that crew to do the maximum of what they're capable of doing. His favorite thing about the job is-- after he gets his orders, he repeats them back. When he has it clear in his head what they want done: leave him alone. If there's some change, say that. Tell me: "Make this change."

26:43. Monotony and repetition.
There are people who will tell you that the cowboy says the same thing-- that it's monotonous... repetitive... the same old same old, which is true, but he thinks it must be like that with every outdoor job. He's never had an indoor job. Everything he's done outdoors. He's run a truck coast to coast a little bit, he's hauled rodeo stock, he's hauled crude oil, lumber, all kinds of stuff. All they want you to do is get out of that yard on time and get the load where it's supposed to be on time, "and get that thing back here." So it's repetitive too. Any variation that's in the job, you have to make it yourself. You have to have a sense of adventure or something that says: "Change this."

27:49. His favorite job that he's had.
He liked cows [i.e. being a cowboy]. He's known a lot of guys who have done only that their whole life since childhood, into old age. There again, he thinks it's the repetitiveness or monotony of the same old same old. But he only worked for two cow outfits, both in Nevada. Everything else was sale barns, feed lots, rodeo, stuff like that. So he has cowboyed but not in the same sense as the buckaroo or the "brush-popper" in Texas. He can only say that the seven years he cowboyed were the best-- he enjoyed those years as a cowpuncher more than anything else he's done.

28:46. Thoughts on ranching and cowboying; his wife.
If the ranches [where he worked] hadn't sold, would he have stayed there? He thinks so-- maybe not, actually, because when the first one went under, he was still single. He is sure that had he not met his future wife [at that time] he probably would have drifted but she and Bimbo actually knew each other in childhood-- she was younger than he was. Their trails crossed at the same time the first ranch was going under. She came out to the ranch and cooked for awhile when they were short of help. She had two children, they decided that [ranch] life was better for the children than anything they could find in town so then they went to other ranches. The second one that went out from under them... [Basically, the owner's children were raised working on the ranch but later educated themselves and didn't see staying in the cow-calf business, so they moved to town, sold the ranch.] He doesn't think our nation knows how tough it is for the family-run job. When they can-- in the spring and fall-- hire help, they need good help-- someone who can show up and take care of whatever [horse] they hand them to ride. He doesn't know if he has the patience for it.

30:51. Would his dream job be cow-punching?
He doesn't dream of owning a "big spread"-- fancy horses and all that-- but he would like to be able to work for an outfit that just needs a guy to go out there and work, tend to things, whatever's going on. You may have to fix your own flat tire, not just nurse cows.

He would like to be in a camp somewhere where they would come and see that he could do the job, then go away and leave him alone. Or, if he can't do it, fire him, get somebody else. He's seen guys do a better job than he would ever do if he was there 50 years.

32:00. Advice for young new hires at the mine.
Keep an open mind. Don't go in with the idea "Well, I'm not gonna do this." Because they might need you in a certain position today, but the market tomorrow may decide they don't need you, because you can only do one thing. "Keep your ears open and your eyes open and your mouth not so open." It's not always the old hands that you learn from. You can learn from somebody that started last week. He thinks that must be true about every job, not just mining. If a young person came to him and said he was considering going to work in the mine, he would tell them "Just keep an open mind, open eyes, open ears, and a closed mouth. You'll get your chance to speak when you're the old hand and the new guys are comin' up." When you've earned yourself a nickname….

33:24. His involvement with cowboy poetry.
Introduces his poem "Thanks." He has done it a hundred times probably in this building [Western Folklife Center]. It's a short one, one of the first ten poems he ever wrote. He would start writing a poem, then somebody would walk up and he would wad it up or throw it in his "warbag"-- "because bronc riders and bull riders don't write poetry!" He said a cowboy found this and read it and said it was pretty good. **[Recites "Thanks," a poem about rodeo clowns]**. There was a fire in a place he was living and by the time he got everything out of there, his gear bag got pretty well scorched. So he went through all the poems-- that must have been 20 or 30 sheets of yellow tablet paper, but some were illegible. He'd give anything to have those back. But, the first one anybody ever saw and said "that's okay" was "Thanks."

37:05. His rodeo experience.
"I was never world champion at that either," but it was something else he really enjoyed. Just roughstock. "I can't hit the ground with a rope..." He was in Arizona and New Mexico at the time where they have some ropers. Those kids down there at seven years old can rope. They're all over the west but that particular part of Arizona, kids grew up with a rope for a toy. They roped everything from lizards to anything a loop would fit around. And some of them got REAL good. Just roughstock-- he rode all three: "bears, broncs, and bulls..." There are no old old bronc riders. Some hang in there a little too long and then wish they hadn't. He would like to have been able to sit up on a bronc and just "hand him that rein," all in a day's work. There was a lot of them he didn't "get rode."

38:35. Wages and incentives in mine work.
One thing he sees in the young people starting into [mining] is the wage. On their first wage, they're making more than their dad is making right now at his job. If they use that for a reason they're not going make it. It's not greed, it's not a lust, it's just the idea that they are there for the paycheck. It's a tough road-- it's a dangerous game, so it does need to pay well. It could pay better than it does. When you go to work, especially the first year or two, try to get really good at what you're doing. Then if a chance allows itself for

you to go somewhere else and make more, or to demand a higher wage where you're at, then you can do it. It's something you have to want to do. When you get there, open up your mind, and see what's going on. Take it home with you if you have to-- think about it when you're laying down to go to sleep. He had to do it and he was 35 years old.

40:17. Health and retirement benefits; worker's relationship to the mine company.
He thinks the older ones that have been there a few years are more concerned about that. The new hires-- the 20-year olds-- when he was that age he didn't think he was ever going to die. He hopes there are young people that think about that-- he's sure there's a percentage that say "this is good insurance, this is good dental, this is good wages..." It doesn't hurt to know that that's there. He thinks it's the mid-30s on up, someone who's established a family, maybe buying a home, maybe has got two mortgages and trying to buy a boat, or a snow machine-- he's the one that really looks at that check stub and says "well, is everything being paid on here." When he goes to the doctor or the drugstore for a prescription, he looks to make sure the mine is [paying their share] because he knows "this is my life." It's what I'm going to provide for my family. When you get to be his age, it's good to know there's a retirement there, if you've done them a good job and they've kept you, you have something to look forward to when you decide not to work.

42:08. Has he written poetry about mining?
He doesn't have any of his mining [poems] committed to memory. Some people doodle with a pen-- his [pen] makes words! Sometimes they don't rhyme and he has to start over. He does have a few things he's written. "Little ditties"-- things he thought maybe [Newmont's] Health and Safety people would be interested in. He has dozens in his head that he's never written down. Maybe he'll write a new one and bring it in.

43:18. Mining lingo and occupational terms.
Simple words like "slope" doesn't mean the same thing to a miner as it would to you. Slope is ground that's at an angle but it's also the slope or pitch that you're putting on a dump with a [bull] dozer. After that dump is complete, you still have to pretty that up and plant it with seed-- do some reclamation. Needless to say, you can't put the dirt back in the hole. But the lingo... A "shot" to miners isn't a drink of whiskey or the sound of a pistol-- it's the powder in the holes that are blasted in order to loosen the muck. Miners might say "shoot," and they're just talking about the shot for that day. A "shoot" could also be the "engineer's shoot" in a pattern through a glass. Simple words like we use everyday might mean something different to a miner. Most professions, vocations have their "correct" terminology and they have their slang, or "brogue" of the trade. It might be "muck" to him; it might be "gold ore" to the person in the mill. The person in the pit might think of that as "ore." He's "muckin' up the piles" and he's "muckin' it" into the feeders. "Muck' to the everyday layman might mean mud. He's sure there's a politically correct terminology for mining, then there's also the brogue.

46:20. Ups and downs of the mining industry.
When gold dropped down to $350-$400 an ounce, ten, twelve years ago, he [came close to being laid off] before they finally started hiring again. He's only seen it one time but he

knows what it must be like for those who are mining other precious metals that do fluctuate greatly every day. Some of the miners that he's talked to don't believe that gold will stay up. The people that do these "futures," will claim that it will eventually get over two thousand and then level out. He doesn't know how they predict that. He hopes they're right. He wants it to last until he's sixty-two and a half (two years away). He hopes it will last for the ones who are going to be in the business for the rest of their working lives. One time he saw it drop to a point where people were leaving Elko County going somewhere else. They might have gone to the next state and mine coal, whatever. Gold doesn't fluctuate. You might see small drops and gains but it doesn't drop by 25% or 50% like some of the other metals do. There are families that have done nothing but mining for generations. "They expect the worst and hope for the best."

48:55. His plans for retirement.
He [and his wife] bought a little motor home. They're going to "go down the road and tell cowboy poetry." He is invited to [events] every year. This year is the first time that the Durango [Cowboy Poetry Gathering] has invited him that he's able to go. He has to take vacation days to do it, but they won't keep asking if he keeps turning them down. They do a show or two every year in about nine states, but he wants to go and do some of those that he hasn't done before. The only way to do it is to quit the mine because the poetry gatherings will not be scheduled to meet his work schedule. His wife wants to keep on working; she runs her business from a laptop. She was just in Cairo back "when the big fiasco was going on." She ran her business from there. They are going to Argentina in October. They can get in that little motor home and "I can go tell stories and she can run her business from that dad-gum laptop."

50:18. Interest in Argentina ranches, gauchos and the Pampas.
Wants to get the names of ranches that welcome [visitors]. They are going to Mendoza, at the base of the mountains on the other side from Chile. If he's that close, he's going to see the Pampas because he's as curious about that as some people are about Australia. He doesn't speak "the lingo" so he can't trust himself to get way down in the middle of nowhere, and then have troubles. He doesn't want to get in their way. He doesn't want them to think they have to [provide a horse and saddle] and give him a tour. He just wants to see how they operate, what's going on there, say hello, take pictures, be a tourist.

51:48. Thanks exchanged; other interview prospects; photographing at the mine.
There are a lot of miners close by that would have better input than he does. He imagines it would be okay to go to the mine and take pictures. He refers to "Mary" [mine company staff] but he can't speak for her [regarding permissions to take photos at the mine]. There's other cowboys out at the mine too-- guys that cowboyed longer than he did who are mining now.

52:35. Gene Vaught, another Newmont employee who sings "safety songs."
The only place he's ever seen him was not at the mine, but at a training event out at the Fire Science Academy [near Carlin]. He thinks Bott has entertained there a few times.

52:57. Tom Baker, employee of Barrick Goldstrike, local artist and poet.
Tom Baker is a miner, works for Barrick [mining company] now. He's a cousin to Della Johns [local ranchwoman, now deceased, who used to perform at the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering]. He's younger than she would have been. He rodeo'd some in high school, but he's had several generations of miners in his family. There were thirteen kids and since their name is Baker, they were all called the Baker's dozen. Tom Baker has performed poetry with Bimbo. They have done the old folks' [home] several times. His wife teaches school at Mountain View [elementary school in Elko]. They do classrooms every year. Baker is a good poet, has written some cowboy poetry, rodeo stuff. He is a gifted artist. "If you've been anywhere in this town you've seen his work somewhere in a store or in an elevator..." He wanted to get involved in the [National Cowboy Poetry Gathering]. Della was so good and so loved. He didn't feel left out-- just that he wasn't noticed because she was so pleasant and gifted as an orator and writer. As a confidante-- you could talk to her about "anything from marbles to airplanes." He comes from good blood.... There are musicians, poets... There are individuals who have [bits of poetry] in the training manuals [for the mine].... [More talk about possible people to contact for the America Works project. More talk about Tom Baker.]

56:11. Closing remarks and sign off.

END OF INTERVIEW